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June 29, 1961

PARTICIPANTS:

United States

The Secretary
Deputy Under Secretary Johnson
Mr. McGeorge Bundy
Mr. Glenn (Interpreter)

Laos

General Phoumi Nosavan

The Secretary said that the General would certainly like to know what kinds of attitudes and what kinds of action might be expected from the United States during the weeks and the months to come. The Secretary expressed his intention to speak with frankness to which friendship authorizes him. The substance of what he was going to say, after his earlier conversation with the President, will be communicated to Ambassador Brown and repeated by the latter to the General and the King of Laos. After apologizing for the apparent discourtesy of such a reminder, the Secretary cautioned the General to be most careful to preserve the secrecy of the meeting, since common enemies of the two countries would be most happy to learn what was said in these conversations.

The Secretary said that he would begin by outlining two main reasons which make it difficult for the United States to take direct military action in Laos.

The first of these is that when President Kennedy took office in January, he found that the United States had been committed by the previous Administration to seek a solution of the Laotian problem through negotiations. Such a commitment is extremely important, not because a new President could not change a position

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taken by the earlier Administration, but because it had created a climate of opinion in the world at large and in the public opinion of the United States in respect to Laos. Moreover, it involved the question of solidarity among the allies and it had repercussions in all those areas of ambiguity which accompany all negotiations.

The second difficulty is even more serious. This is that the United States is in a confrontation throughout the world with the Sino-Soviet Bloc. Thus the question of Laos is not only the question of Laos as such but also that of this world-wide confrontation. When the United States thinks of a military action, it must do so after taking into consideration the responsibilities which it and it alone has in respect to itself and to the entire world. In consequence, a decision in regard to Laos might well mean a decision in regard to World War III. The Secretary said this not to show a fear or a particular concern on the part of the United States in regard to World War III, but simply to show that a decision taken in Washington is by its very nature different from a decision which might be taken in Vientiane, and this because a decision taken in Washington or in Moscow might be such as to reduce all of Laos to ashes. This is for the United States a question of conscience and of moral principle, and of what the United States feels it owes to the two million Laotians. It is possible that a decision might involve only the lives of a few thousand or of a few tens of thousands of soldiers. It is possible also that such a decision might involve the lives of hundreds or millions of people.

It is the tragedy of the peaceful Laotian people that they are involved in the confrontation between the great powers, in which they should not be involved at all. The U.S. is, nevertheless, fully conscious of having undertaken to do its utmost in order to prevent a Communist takeover of Laos. This undertaking has three reasons. The first one is the Laotian people themselves. The second

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one is Southeast Asia; and the third one is the position and the prestige of the U.S. in the world. Actions of the past have proved that the U.S. is in earnest in regard to Laos. For example, if only the efforts of the foreign nations were considered, it would be clear that the actions in the defense of Laotian independence of countries other than the U.S. were very puny indeed.

There are circumstances under which the U.S. would find it necessary to send its own armed forces to defend Laotian independence. The Secretary expressed his feeling that under such circumstances the principal allies of the U.S. would also find it necessary to participate in the struggle. If, however, the Secretary is to speak frankly and as a friend, he finds it impossible for the U.S. to state precisely and in advance what might be the circumstances under which the U.S. would find it necessary to intervene militarily. This is because to state such circumstances in advance would amount to delegating to the Government of Laos the responsibility for the decisions and the policy of the U.S. The Secretary therefore cannot state what set of circumstances would automatically bring about military action as a response of the U.S. A better way, however, is to call for mutual trust and openness between the Laotian Government and ourselves.

To give an example, the Secretary then recalled the events of these recent weeks. At the beginning of the Geneva Conference the Secretary sent a message to the General, in which he called upon the Royal Laotian Government to avoid making premature concessions to Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao. At that time his colleagues, the Foreign Ministers of France and of the U.K., transmitted similar messages to the Laotian Government. Although the Secretary did not see the texts of those messages, he was assured that they were indeed transmitted by the two Governments mentioned.

The Secretary indicated he wished to renew at this moment the same advice and the same appeal against premature concessions to the enemy. He said he gave this

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advice with the full realization of the responsibility of his office and of the responsibility of the U.S. as a great power. The Secretary reiterated that he did not believe that the General, the King of Laos, and Prince Boun Oum should consider the situation as calling for surrender. This is the advice which the Secretary felt he had to give as a friend. The Secretary furthermore said that the General should not advise the King to enter on the path of premature concessions leading to the formation of a coalition Government which would be in fact dominated by the Communists. The question arises how this advice can be followed, when it is accompanied by a feeling of uncertainty. The only answer which can be given to this question is to suggest that -- should the Government and the King be willing -- daily contacts be maintained between the Laotian and the U.S. Government, so as to transmit from one to the other a full and frank expression of its thoughts and intentions. The Secretary assured the General that the President of the U.S. will not deceive the latter, and that if the two Governments remain in close liaison and act in a concerted manner in the future, at the very least each will know the thoughts of the other. The U.S. is committed to the defense of freedom in the entire world, which means also in Laos. Looking at the situation from Vientiane, it is possible to think that there is a certain indifference in American attitude. This, however, is not the case.

The Secretary stated that he had to add a highly important comment. He is doing so not to be critical but only to be frank. If the U.S. is to call on its young men to go and fight to defend the freedom of another country, it must be quite certain of the desire of that country for freedom. This is a question of moral principle and also a question of practical necessity. Therefore, it is of the highest importance to make certain that the will to defend freedom not only exists in Laos but also is made obvious to the entire world, and complete

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solidarity and readiness to accept sacrifice on the part of the Laotian people becomes more apparent. American soldiers are not mercenaries who can be used to defend the causes of other people. The Secretary can say this with the utmost frankness because he knows of the great gallantry with which the General has defended the cause of freedom.

The Secretary appealed for close contacts between the General, the King and the Laotian Government on the one hand, and Ambassador Brown and the U.S. Government on the other, in order to obtain concerted efforts on both sides to determine the manner in which the defense of Laos can be best assured. The Secretary repeated that it is not possible to bring more precision to the description of the American position, as any attempt at such a clarification would amount to deception. The Secretary said that he had spoken with a frankness which went beyond traditional diplomatic practice. His concern in doing so was to clarify the situation. It is not necessary to think of an intervention in Laos in terms of risk to the lives of a few thousands or a few tens of thousands of soldiers, but rather in the terms of the danger of a direct clash between the two greatest powers. If a certain caution could be felt in the actions of the U.S. Government, it was not so much due to the undertaking entered into by the previous administration to seek a solution through negotiations, or to the concern about possible consequences, as due primarily to a deep sense of responsibility on the part of the U.S. The responsibility of the U.S. is, among other things, that of preserving Laotian independence and not making Laos into a cemetery. The question is a very complex one, and the only answer is close liaison between the two Governments and concerted action by them. The simplest answers may sometimes be also the worst answers. What is sought is the independence of Laos and not the crushing of Laos between the millstones of the two great powers.

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If the United States has taken a position for the neutrality of Laos, it is certainly not because of a lack of appreciation for what the General and men like him have done. The Secretary asked the General to believe that one of the motivations of the United States is a reluctance to involve the Laotian people in a tragedy. The United States has no national ambitions in Laos. It does not seek any military bases in Laos and neither does it seek a military ally in Laos. The extent of its ambitions in regard to Laos is to safeguard the latter's freedom and independence, and this is also the ambition of the Laotians themselves. The Secretary repeated his apologies for having been more frank than is traditional in diplomacy; he was frank in order to show the necessity for a close and complete liaison between the two Governments.

In conclusion, the Secretary said that the Laotians should not feel that they must surrender; neither should they feel that they must accept Communist domination nor, again should they feel that they lack support. The Secretary added, after apologizing for an indiscretion of such a remark, that the United States Government feels that the historical moment has come for His Majesty the King to exercise a greater degree of direct influence. The Secretary understands the King's reluctance at playing an active part in politics. However, if his understanding of the situation is correct, the Laotian people have a great respect for the institution of monarchy. There are times when such respect can be safeguarded only by taking appropriate decisions. It is clear that in a Communist Laos there would be no place for a King, and that the moment has come for the King to assert his leadership. It is possible that the King may be reluctant to take actions which might create a risk for the institution of the monarchy. However, if the Secretary is to consider risking the life of his son in the defense of Laos, the King should also consider taking risks for the crown.

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General Phoumi Nosavan thanked the Secretary for the latter's frankness and for the expression of his opinion. The General shares many of those opinions; in particular in regard to actions which would be desirable on the part of the King.

There is, however, something which makes difficult action on the part of the King and also on the part of the General. This is a lack of clarity as to the United States position. Such a lack of clarity makes it difficult to take decisions. Therefore, one of the things which the General would greatly like to understand better is what actions the United States contemplates in the near future from the political, diplomatic and military points of view.

The Geneva conference was convened, in fact, against the wishes of the Royal Laotian Government. The General believes that the United States has already committed itself in Geneva to a certain objective. He would appreciate it if more precision could be given to him as to the nature of that objective. This is of the highest importance to determine the future actions of the Laotian Government.

The Secretary said that the United States seeks the neutrality and the independence of Laos. In Geneva, the United States delegation has supported all the proposals which could lead to a maximum of international assistance to genuine independence and neutrality of Laos. The United States is in favor of an effective international machinery, without a Soviet veto, which would prevent infiltration into Laos of arms or men, and the development of any situation which would endanger Laotian independence. In consequence, the United States is for a strong international commission without a Soviet veto.

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The question of the Geneva conference, however, is secondary at the present moment as compared to that of the establishment of a coalition government in Laos. Should there be established a coalition government which would in fact be dominated by the Communists, the United States would lose all interest in Laos. The United States does not intend to subscribe to a fiction. Not one dollar would be spent on either military or economic aid for a Laos which would not be genuinely independent. The United States will have no part in any decision or any action which would make Laos Communist.

From the American point of view, the so called neutralists in Laos are in fact the allies of the Communists. If a possibility existed for those neutralists to be drawn away from the Communists, so as to become allied with the Royal Laotian Government, that would greatly improve the prospects for the future. At the present moment, however, the United States Government is sceptical as to the possibility of a coalition government based on the idea of the three forces and of an apportionment of portfolios, which would, in fact, be dominated by the Communists. If the neutralists can be drawn away from the Pathet Lao and toward the Government, the situation might be different.

The General said that if he understood correctly, the United States has decided to approve the objectives of the Geneva conference.

The Secretary said that this was not exactly the case, although the United States would view with favor such objectives if the situation permitted that they be genuinely reached. The Geneva conference, however, is of a secondary importance at the present moment, as he noted earlier. The Secretary mentioned as an example the early days of the Geneva conference when he was isolated in Geneva. He was insisting at the time that

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it was absurd to seat the Souvanna Phouma and the Pathet Lao delegations on a footing of equality with the delegation of the Royal Laotian Government. Yet at that very moment at Van Namone, the three delegations were gathering on a footing of equality and amidst a great display of friendly relations, including champagne luncheons. To be fair, it ~~is~~ must be said that the United States Government suggested to the Royal Laotian Government that the latter participate in the Van Namone talks; the question is, however, of the spirit and the atmosphere which surrounded these talks. If the United States Government is to take a firm position at major international conferences, it must be sure that its friends will not pull the rug from under it. In consequence, the Secretary renewed his appeal for close contacts between the two Governments, so as to avoid any situation in which any one of them would be in the dark concerning the thoughts of the other one, in order both to avoid any actions other than those agreed upon jointly, and to avoid any premature concessions to the enemy. The Secretary expressed the hope that the King might assert his influence, for example by making the three Princes come to him in Luang Prabang.

The Secretary said that the General might wish to continue this conversation the next day at the reception to be offered by the Charge de Affaires in honor of the General.

The General said that he did not wish to take advantage of the Secretary's kindness and take up too much of his time. He recognized that there was not enough liaison between the two Governments and in fact such actions as those leading to the Geneva conference, the Van Namone meetings and the meetings of the three Princes in Zurich were taken without much consultation.

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The Secretary remarked that direct consultation and close contacts are much better than any formal definition of positions, especially in regard to hypothetical situations concerning a future which no one can foresee. The Secretary indicated that the United States is interested not only in Laos but in all of Southeast Asia and that events in Laos can not fail to have an influence on Thailand, Cambodia and South Viet-Nam. In turn, events in Southeast Asia cannot fail to influence the world situation. Thus the involvement of the United States in world affairs does not mean that the United States may have appeared negligent in regard to Laos, rather on the contrary. The Secretary said that if he had spoken to General with a somewhat brutal frankness, it is because he had not always been a diplomat. He also used to be a soldier and had fought in Southeast Asia and in particular in the North part of Burma where he had seen action along side with the Karins and the Kachins who remind him very much of the Khas and the Meos of Laos.

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